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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [FR](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: NEA A/S WELCH DISCUSSES KOUCHNER VISIT TO IRAQ AT  
FRENCH MFA, AUGUST 21

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Visiting NEA A/S Welch used the beginning of his August 21 meeting with the director of French FM Kouchner's private office, Philippe Etienne, to ask about Kouchner's then ongoing visit to Iraq (other subjects reported separately). Etienne expressed pleasure at the generally positive reaction in France to the visit, notwithstanding some criticism, and believed Iraqis understood Kouchner's basic message that France is concerned about the situation in Iraq and prepared to reengage. However, Etienne underscored that Kouchner's visit was undertaken on his own initiative and in a way that made clear it was entirely French. He noted that Kouchner had contacted the Secretary prior to the visit to explain its objectives and has reached out to EU counterparts to encourage them to reassess their position on Iraq and reengage. Welch briefed Etienne on our approach, emphasizing the need to reinforce efforts to promote Iraqi national reconciliation with regional efforts to secure support for the Iraqi government. End summary

¶2. (C) During a meeting between visiting NEA A/S Welch and FM Kouchner's private office director, Philippe Etienne, Welch asked about Kouchner's then ongoing visit to Iraq. Welch wanted to know in particular how the visit was going and what had prompted Kouchner to undertake it. Etienne said that the MFA was pleased with the visit, feeling that it was generally depicted in positive terms despite some domestic criticism in France. The harshest critic so far -- arguing that the visit was a humiliating gesture by France to placate the U.S. -- was Jean-Pierre Chevenement, the former defense minister who resigned in 1991 over France's participation in the Gulf War coalition. Most other opinion has been very supportive of the visit. Still, the French public and media are seeking to understand the visit, and Etienne cited as an example Kouchner's exchange with a French radio interviewer who had asked "has France's policy changed?" Kouchner's response was that it was the situation in Iraq that was changing, and the international community had to react accordingly. Etienne confirmed that Kouchner timed his arrival to occur exactly four years after the attack on UN headquarters in Iraq that killed so many UN friends and colleagues with whom he had worked in Kosovo. He had been especially close to the UN director in Iraq at the time, Sergio de Mello, who perished in the blast.

¶3. (C) According to Etienne, Kouchner believes Iraqis understand his core message (that France cares about the situation in Iraq, is willing to listen to all parties in the context of the struggle to achieve national reconciliation, and wants to turn the page in bilateral relations with Baghdad). Kouchner wanted to emphasize that his visit was an entirely French initiative. Partly for that reason, he arrived on a French military plane. Equally important was the fact that the visit was technically in response to an

invitation from Iraqi President Talabani (which Kouchner made sure came from Talabani in his capacity as president and not as a Kurdish leader). Etienne noted that Kouchner knew Talabani and many other Iraqi leaders personally from previous associations over the years. Kouchner was staying at Talabani's Baghdad residence.

¶4. (C) Etienne noted that Kouchner spoke to the Secretary prior to his visit to let her know that it was going to happen and would speak to her after his return to Paris. Kouchner has already contacted a number of his EU colleagues (notably the British foreign secretary and Javier Solana) and encouraged them to make similar visits.

¶5. (C) In response to Etienne's request for U.S. impressions of Kouchner's visit, Welch responded that we regard it quite positively. He lauded Kouchner's desire to enter into dialogue with all of Iraq's political factions and lamented that they had such a hard time talking to each other. Welch reviewed our assessment of the challenges of promoting national reconciliation in Iraq and noted the particular challenge we face of applying our own benchmarks to measure progress in Iraq when Iraqis do not use or accept similar benchmarks. He then outlined our efforts to garner regional support for the Iraqi government in the face of suspicions of the Maliki government by many of Iraq's neighbors and problems posed by Iran and Syria as they relate to Iraq. As in Lebanon, it is key to supplement internal efforts at national reconciliation with regional assistance. Welch explained that, in that spirit, we are working with Gulf States, Egypt, and Jordan to coordinate efforts and contain the prevalent anti-Maliki sentiment. These countries now see our contribution to resolving the Iraqi situation as irreplaceable and are worried about our withdrawing too rapidly. Etienne asked how we regarded the larger grouping

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of Iraq's neighbors, to include Syria and Iran. Welch replied that we are exploring how to make this structure work but it has so far not yielded positive results. Looking ahead, the GCC plus 2 grouping should meet again at UNGA, while a ministerial-level meeting of the "neighbors" (including Iran and Syria) should convene next in Istanbul in mid-October.

¶6. (C) In response to Etienne's question about the future of the U.S./Iran dialogue on security issues conducted by ambassadors in Baghdad, Welch said that we have not found it terribly positive or fruitful, but we intend to continue it. Again answering Etienne's question, Welch stated we have no plans to raise the level or widen the scope of the discussions. In discussing our present security concerns in Iraq, Welch mentioned the ongoing problem of foreign fighters using Syria to cross into Iraq. Many of those fighters seem to be Saudis or North Africans. Etienne interjected that France is aware of and tracking closely French citizens mostly of North African origin who have volunteered to fight in Iraq.

¶7. (U) A/S Welch has cleared this cable.

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